

laid. The male was never seen incubating the eggs.

The first egg hatched on September 6, 2000 at 0700 hrs, while the second hatched at 1400 hrs on the same day. The third egg hatched two days later in the morning. The incubation period for each egg was 16, 15 and 16 days respectively. Both the parents fed the chicks, but most of the work was done by the female, while the male took very little part in it.

All three chicks fledged on September 21, 2000 at 0800 hrs.

March 23, 2001

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34. THE SPANISH SPARROW *PASSER HISPANIOLENSIS* FOUND NESTING IN HANUMANGARH DISTRICT, RAJASTHAN

On March 26, 1999, we were at Badopal Lake, Hanumangarh district, Rajasthan watching migratory birds on passage. Large mixed flocks of Spanish sparrow *Passer hispaniolensis* and house sparrow *Passer domesticus* were conspicuous in the area, mainly around the ripe wheat fields and *Acacia tortilis* plantations along the road. The flocks of Spanish sparrow were exceptionally vocal, calling incessantly and seeming very restless. The whole area was alive with their noisy and restless behaviour.

After watching the birds on the lake in the morning, we retired to the shade of the plantation for lunch, where the Spanish sparrows were calling feverishly. While watching the birds, we noticed a few nests on *Acacia tortilis* trees. A few males in breeding plumage were loudly calling "che che che ..." while displaying with their tails cocked up and moving actively around the nests. Two males were noticed mounting females.

We counted 22 nests on six *Acacia tortilis* trees. These nests were about 6-9 m above the ground, made up of fresh straw collected from the nearby wheat fields. The nests were c. 25-30 cm in diameter, matching the dimensions given

by Gavrilov (1963), and almost spherical in shape. Fresh straw was used on the outer surface of the nests. Most of the nests were on the biggest *Acacia tortilis* tree, located on its terminal branches.

On a second visit to the site on April 18, 1999, ten more nests were found. Two males were displaying with their tails cocked up, and six males were observed carrying some downy material (probably cotton from the nearby fields) and entering the nests.

The Spanish sparrow is a winter visitor to the northwestern part of the Subcontinent (Ali and Ripley 1987; Roberts 1992). It breeds extraliminally in Central Asia westwards to the Caucasus and eastwards throughout Kazakhstan. The birds start the return flight from their winter quarters to the native areas about the beginning of March. The establishment of colonies in breeding areas usually takes place a few days after the beginning of mass arrivals, during the middle or end of May. The birds usually nest in very large colonies (Gavrilov 1963). In contrast, the nesting colony at Badopal was very small and established as early as March.

The sparrow nests almost exclusively in cultivated areas, living in the proximity of man.

The availability of grain crops is one of the necessary conditions for these birds, and they seldom nest at any distance away from cultivation (Gavrilov 1963). Development of extensive plantations and agriculture during the last forty years or so in northern Rajasthan seems to have provided the Spanish sparrow with excellent living conditions conducive to establishing the first nesting colony in the Indian subcontinent.

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Note from the Referee:

The spread of grain cultivation and tree plantation in Rajasthan has nothing to do with this unusual nesting. Such favourable conditions have existed for nearly half a century over most of the Spanish sparrow's migration route. What is significant is the fact that a species known to be highly gregarious and colonial in nesting, has not done this before. Similar examples of greater flamingos and rosy starlings have been recorded from time to time, usually of abortive attempts by small colonies to nest in unusual locations. I was fortunate during a holiday trip to Kazakhstan two summers ago, to sit under a thorn tree roadside plantation in an otherwise treeless

steppe grassland region, where above my head about 500 pairs of Spanish sparrows were nesting, so I can easily visualise what the authors saw in Hanumangarh district. Dissection of rosy starlings on passage in April/May has shown that their gonads are fully developed for breeding, and early writers like Ticehurst often speculated why they did not breed within the confines of India. Like the Spanish sparrow, small rosy starling colonies are often opportunistic, e.g. they have nested in the crevices between a stack of logs, and don't show great site fidelity for choosing their nesting site. The main motivation seems to be synchronous breeding, as is the case with the Spanish sparrow also. When the colony decides to leave, late fledglings are often left to starve in their nests! Huge colonies of over 1,000 birds do exhibit site fidelity, for obvious logistical reasons, but the central Asian breeding population of Spanish sparrows does have small offshoot breeding colonies, despite what Gavrilov wrote in describing huge breeding colonies in the *Journal*. The one I saw in Kazakhstan was alongside a huge field bearing a crop of Safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*), which is like a thorny thistle and then still in flower, so not suitable food for a sparrow. Otherwise, that colony had to depend entirely on small grasshoppers and wild grass seeds for feeding their nestlings. There were no cereal grain crops within miles and miles. This is why I feel it does not add to our knowledge when the authors speculate that favourable habitat was the reason for breeding in Rajasthan. The observation teaches us more about the needs of colonial and synchronous nesting species — T.J. Roberts.

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